 Analyse how the writer presented a positive or negative view of humanity and society.

The Crucible by Arthur Miller was written both as an emphatic declaration against a very specific set of political events in 1950s America, McCarthyism, and also as a general manifesto of principle against the recurrent and destructive tendency human societies have of demonizing and persecuting groups and individuals who are different. The play is based on a series of events that occurred in 1692 in a New England community, a setting chosen for several important historical and allegorical reasons. Miller examines the effect of irrational religious hysteria in the small village of Salem, Massachusetts, exploring its destructive effects on the community, motivations and actions of individuals involved. Conflicts between established political and religious authority and personal integrity and ethics, are of central importance in the story; their salience in the political climate Miller found himself in during the McCarthy era is unambiguous. In The Crucible he examines the challenge individuals face when confronted with conflicts between loyalty, principle, expediency and fear. To do this he uses allegory, metaphor, emotionally-charged dialogue and strongly opinion centred narrative. These reflect his seething frustration and disillusionment with his fellow educated liberals during the McCarthy era.  If this were an essay for the exam, I would tell you to re-present their language – ‘Miller presents a negative view of society …’ but the subtlety is better for a crafted piece of writing.  Just be aware of staying close to the original premise.

When Arthur Miller wrote The Crucible he was already a well-known, author. Like many public figures Miller’s views were placed under scrutiny by Senator McCarthy, who was expelling suspected communists from influential public positions. A climate of fear and repression amongst educated people ensued, as McCarthy’s influence increased. It culminated in the establishment of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. The formalization of McCarthy’s authority provoked Miller to question whether the balance between the power of the state and the freedom of the individual that is a fundamental cornerstone of the American Constitution had been undermined. In the preface he states: “It is still impossible for man to organize his social life without repressions and the balance has yet to be struck between order and freedom.”

The play’s setting in a New England puritan community, one of the earliest settled in America, is particularly significant. New England was the metaphorical crucible where American society and values were formed. The puritans fled religious persecution in Europe hoping to establish a free and tolerant society in the new world. It is ironic that the Salem Witch Trials, some of the most infamous events in the new nation’s history, occurred there. Miller is drawing an allegorical comparison with McCarthyism. At that time political and personal rights and freedoms contracted under oppressive regimes and Salem’s rigidly socially, religiously conformist social order is an allegory of that. Many Americans, some like Miller whose descendants fled extremist persecution in Europe, vehemently repudiated similar repression in America.

The cost of repression, intolerance of unorthodox views and paranoia, to a nation and society is a small part of the evil Miller reveals. He explores the damage to communities and individuals at the most fundamental, intimate level and these are the most powerful and universal themes of the play.  Here the most universal and unfortunate aspects of human nature are explored: Irrational fear of the unfamiliar, superstition, greed, lust, self-interest, betrayal and revenge.

The first act depicts Betty Parris, collapsed in fear of discovery by her rigid father.  This scene of affliction powerfully prefaces the dysfunction the dysfunction that is about to infect the community. The room is small and spare symbolizing the austere, insular and repressive village society. Rev. Parris explodes with suspicion at Tituba, a West Indian servant. It is no coincidence that Tituba, the most marginalized person in town is the first to be blamed. Later, when Hale interrogates her he does so not angrily, but with insinuating, condescending kindness. This tells her the heathen role she must play to avoid punishment; “Hale: (*kindly*): Who came to you with the Devil?*Tituba pants, and begins rocking back and forth again, staring ahead”.* The dialogue builds from this subdued beginning to intensely dramatic; “Tituba, *in a fury:* He say Mr. Parris must be kill!… *They gasp”.*The imperfect English grammar and stormy imagery in the passage emphasize the emotionally charged state of mass hysteria that ensues.  Good, Raven.

Unfortunate events begin to take on sinister, supernatural appearances as the townsfolk seek people to blame. The first to admit engaging in witchcraft are young, unsophisticated, vulnerable girls. Abigail deftly manipulates the situation to settle petty scores, gain attention, without scruple. The girls are easily intimidated and whipped into hysteria by the much more worldly and Abigail. She frightens them with threat; “Let either of you breathe a word, or the edge of a word, about the other things, and I will come to you in the black of some terrible night and I will bring a pointy reckoning that will shudder you”.

Miller takes a strong narrative opinion by telling us directly what characters think and feel and by telling us directly what to think of them. In Act 1 he states, Mrs Putnam is “a twisted soul … a death ridden woman”. He reveals Putnam’s agenda when tells us “ at the moment he is intent upon getting Parris, for whom he has only contempt, to move toward the abyss”. It is a strong indication of the fact that the play is intended as a philosophical statement.

These scenes reflect Miller’s bitterness toward peers who denounced others to settle scores or for personal gain. This is alluded to when the townsfolk’s grievances and feuds erupt. Mrs Putnam says “There are wheels within wheels in this village and fires within fires!” This is a dual metaphor; Mrs Putnam fears the supernatural is at work but the destructive scheming is being done by the townsfolk themselves. Miller uses simple old-fashioned language to enhance the dramatic impact of the dialogue. Yet he emphasizes the link to present day events through more sophisticated, contemporary narrative when describing scenes and introducing characters. The Crucible contains characters who are unusually toxic. Abigail Williams, Thomas Putnam and Reverend Parris cynically and systematically denounce others and are motivated by lust, venality and ambition. They are the metaphorical embodiment of Miller’s contempt for the right wing intellectuals, politicians and academics who profited by and collaborated with the communist witch-hunt.